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- (1) Editorial: Agreed plan for Futenma relocation not a fundamental solution; Danger still left behind

RYUKYU SHIMPO (Page 5) (Full)
April 8, 2006

The city of Nago (in Okinawa Prefecture) and the government have now concurred on a remodified plan to build an alternative facility in the city's coastal area to take over the heliport functions of the US Marine Corps' Futenma Air Station. Nago and Tokyo were wide apart in their respective stances over Futenma relocation, with the city insisting on variations to the previous offshore heliport installation plan and the government prevailing on the city to accept some minor changes to the current coastal relocation plan. However, the two sides have bridged the gulf with a government proposal to lay down a V-shaped pair of

airstrips on the newly planned airfield for Futenma. The mayor of Nago City will account for the agreed plan to the city's population and ask for their understanding when he returns from Tokyo.

The Futenma relocation issue has now entered a new phase with the concurrence between Nago and Tokyo. However, there is still something unconvincing to us. That is because we cannot but feel that the Nago mayor, in the end, was trapped by the government's tactic of trivializing its talks with the mayor into bargaining intended to qualify the plan with some slim modifications to build the Futenma alternative in a coastal area of Camp Schwab across the cape of Henoko in Nago.

In its talks with Nago, the government made a proposal to build two runways. This overture was the kiss of life for Tokyo. Nago called for the government to avoid setting up the flight paths of US warplanes over the city's local community areas of Henoko, Toyohara, and Abu. It will now be possible to do so with two airstrips to be laid down in a V-shape. US warplanes are supposed to use the two tarmacs in their landing approach and takeoff roll, depending on the wind direction. Indeed, this would help avoid flying over the city's residential areas. However, their flight paths close in on the coastline near the community of Matsuda. The flight paths set for US military aircraft are off the city's populated areas but close to its coastal land areas near the area of Abu.

In many cases, aircraft trouble is unpredictable. We therefore cannot say the city's local communities are completely free from danger. Whatever steps the government may take, local residents will have to constantly shoulder the risk of aircraft accidents if a military base is contiguous to their communities. We assume

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that the Nago mayor reached the agreement with an understanding of such a risk. The mayor, as well as the government that has pushed for the relocation plan, will therefore have to be prepared to be liable in part for any accident should it occur.

At first, Nago insisted on substantial changes to the government's coastal relocation plan. In October last year, Japan and the United States agreed to build a Futenma replacement facility in a coastal area of Camp Schwab. However, Nago called for it to be moved to an offshore site more than 400 meters away from that coastal location. For one thing, the mayor was concerned about safety. For another, he considered noise pollution. When it comes to safety, the mayor may think he can now clear the problem by changing the direction of the planned airstrips. However, the question is what to do about noise pollution. In addition, environmental preservation has now become a matter of major concern with the Henoko offing airstrip installation plan in place. We wonder if the mayor can resolve this problem.

Furthermore, Okinawa Prefecture's Governor Inamine has clarified that the Okinawa prefectural government will continue to uphold its stance even after the agreement this time.

In November 1999, Inamine, who became governor in 1998, designated an area in waters off the coast of Henoko in the city of Nago for Futenma relocation. In those days, the governor, for his acceptance of Futenma relocation to Nago, made it a precondition to build a dual-purpose airport for joint military and civilian use and to set a 15-year time limit on the US military's use of that sea-based facility in order to prevent it from becoming permanent. Based on those preconditions, Okinawa Prefecture worked out a basic plan together with Tokyo and Nago for the construction of a dual-use airport. Can we take it that these two preconditions have now been completely scrapped with the agreement reached this time on the government's remodified plan?

If they answer that question in the affirmative, it then means that Nago will lose the powerful brake that could prevent the base from becoming permanent. The agreement signed yesterday also

has no mention of limits. We wonder if the residents of Nago City, neighboring municipalities, and Okinawa Prefecture will accept the construction of an additional permanent base.

This time around, we must not forget that the greater part of Okinawa Prefecture's population wants Futenma airfield to be moved out of Okinawa Prefecture or Japan.

The government has replaced the Henoko offshore installation plan with the coastal relocation plan. Tokyo and Nago played a tug of war over modifications to the proposed coastal relocation plan. As a result, relocation to the Henoko area was feasible. It was a categorical imperative for talks between Tokyo and Nago on everything.

The matter of primary concern to us should be what to do about US military bases in Okinawa and how to get rid of danger deriving from their presence.

As Ginowan Mayor Yoichi Iha has also noted, the relocation of Futenma airfield to Henoko's coastal area only transplants the Futenma problem to this island prefecture's northern part. US

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warplanes may avoid flying over residential areas. Even so, danger will encroach on local communities around the relocation site. This, at least, is an indisputable fact.

We also wonder if the government has seriously considered the option of moving Futenma airfield out of Okinawa Prefecture or otherwise out of Japan. This time, the government was tenacious in its talks with Nago City. We wonder if the government could not show such a tenacious stance (to the US) toward relocating Futenma airfield to a site outside Okinawa Prefecture or Japan.

People living in the Henoko area may take it for granted that the government has chosen to risk their lives while waving pork-barrel largesse and other tasty carrots at them. This cannot be convincing to them no matter how much the government emphasizes that the choice is for the sake of Japan's national defense.

The Futenma replacement facility, should it be built in accordance with the agreement, will be permanent through future generations. Is that really all right? We want to raise this question once again.

(2) Editorial: Listen to Okinawa residents' views on Futenma relocation issue

TOKYO SHIMBUN (Page 5) (Full)
April 11, 2006

The central government and the Nago municipal government have finally reached an agreement on relocating the US Marine Corps' Futenma Air Station. But Okinawa Governor Keiichi Inamine has opposed the agreed plan, probably reflecting public opinion in the prefecture. Taking his opposition seriously, the government should persistently continue discussion with the Okinawa government.

Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi said yesterday: "I would like to have a heart-to-heart talk with the governor in due course," revealing his willingness to try to persuade Inamine. However, the prime minister's lack of eagerness toward the Okinawa issue is one of the reasons for making Inamine distrustful of the government. Should the prime minister pokes his nose in the matter now, the situation might become more complicated.

The modified plan agreed on between the central and Nago municipal governments on April 7 proposes constructing two runways in a V-shape to prevent US military aircraft from flying over residential areas by using one for landings and the other for takeoffs. The government worked out this measure in response to a call from Nago.

Nonetheless, the agreement is just a product of compromise

between the central government, which has no intention to accept any major changes, and the Nago government, which called for moving the newly planned runway to an offshore site 400 meters away from the coastal area. There are still problems, remaining to be resolved.

First is the safety problem. Although the plan avoids setting up flight paths over residential areas, there are places where aircraft will buzz the ground. The government has yet to work out safety measures. There are also serious concerns about noise pollution.

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Another concern is about environmental problems. Giving consideration to environmental protection, the government proposed in its plan last fall minimizing the site of reclamation. Under the revised plan, though, severe environmental destructions could be caused due to an extensive reclamation site as a result of building an additional runway in a coastal area of Camp Schwab. In this sense, it might be quite natural for residents to react fiercely to the revised plan.

Okinawa residents have been calling for a plan to move US military bases from Okinawa to somewhere in Japan or in other countries. The governor's opposition to the new plan reflects popular sentiments in the prefecture, rather than his wish to save his face.

The central government must not make light of the governor's opposition. If it incorporates the Camp Schwab plan in a final report on US force realignment without obtaining understanding from local communities, the government will come under heavy fire again.

Should the government decide to enact a law that would transfer authority on land reclamation from the prefectural governor to the central government on the pretext of the agreement between the central and Nago governments, Okinawa residents will undoubtedly explode with anger. In response, anti-base movements might break out in areas housing US military bases across the nation.

It is an urgent task, though, to relocate the Futenma heliport functions surrounded by densely populated residential areas. Although 10 years have passed since Japan and the US agreed to relocate the airfield, the residents are still living in the face of the danger posed from low-altitude flights.

Of the most importance is to ensure the safety of the residents. If a meeting between Prime Minister Koizumi and Governor Inamine is arranged, Koizumi should not take the stance of giving priority only to the Japan-US alliance, while Inamine also should not hold on to the conditions he attached when he accepted the initial Henoko plan. Both sides are expected to hold a heart-to-heart discussion in a cool-headed manner.

(3) Editorial - Futenma relocation: Okinawa still left in anguish

ASAHI (Page 3) (Full)
April 9, 2006

Nago City has accepted the central government's revision to the current (coastal) plan for relocating the US Marine Corps' Futenma Air Station to Cape Henoko of Nago City.

Under the revised plan, two runways will be constructed in a V-shape, and they will be used for taking off and landing. The revised plan has some contrivances to meet Nago City's call not to allow US military aircraft to fly over residential areas.

The central government intends to put the revision this time in a final report it will shortly present, but it is not safe to say that the relocation to Nago City will go smoothly.

Okinawa Prefecture still remains opposed to the coastal plan.

Following the agreement this time between Nago City and the central government, Gov. Keiichi Inamine met with Defense Agency (JDA) Director-General Nukaga. In the meeting, Inamine renewed his determination not to accept any other plan but the previous plan to relocate the airfield to a site off Henoko.

As a relocation site for Futenma airfield, a site off Henoko was initially planned. However, opponents to the plan staged demonstrations at sea against construction work. Last year, the Japanese and US governments altered the plan and chose Cape Henoko as a new relocation site because the site is accessible by land. This change, however, will increase chances of residents being exposed to danger and the impact of noise pollution.

For Inamine, the major difference between these two plans is that he accepted the offshore plan premised on limiting the US military's use of a new facility to 15 years and building it as an airport for joint military and civilian use.

Afterwards, the Japanese and US governments agreed to relocate the airfield to Cape Henoko, ignoring such conditions. Inamine is therefore distrustful of both the Japanese and US governments, which decided on the relocation site, disregarding the prefecture's desire.

The central government is well aware that the relocation process will not advance without the governor's consent. Even if an alternate facility is constructed on Cape Henoko, an area accessible by land, it would be unavoidable to reclaim land from the sea. Authorization on reclamation is held by the governor.

At one point in the past, an idea was floated of enacting a law designed to deprive the governor of such an authorization. But if that were to be done, it would only fuel the flame of objections from the Okinawa prefectural government and its people to the central government.

If the central government were to be serious about relocating Futenma airfield, it should strive to dispel Inamine's sense of distrust. His sentiments are presumably shared among most people of the prefecture.

A joint poll conducted last fall by the Asahi Shimbun and the Okinawa Times showed that 72% of the respondents were opposed to the relocation of the Futenma base to Cape Henoko. Of the opponents, 84% hoped the base would be relocated to the US mainland.

More than 60 years have passed since the end of World War II, but because of the presence of the military facilities, there seems to be no end to accidents and incidents related to US military facilities in Okinawa Prefecture. With a vast expanse of land occupied by the US military in the prefecture, city planning does not go smoothly. The US military presence has obstructed moves to start up new businesses. Okinawa is described as being located in the midst of bases. The anti-base sentiments of residents in Okinawa are deep-seated in such a reality.

Nonetheless, Nago City has accepted a plan for the construction of a new military facility that will be the first such facility since the reversion of Okinawa to Japan. Behind this move is the earnest desire of the prefectural people to transfer the dangerous Futenma airfield to somewhere as quickly as possible.

If the central government failed to pay attention to the anguish harbored by the Okinawa people, its attempt would only come to a deadlock.

Minshuto (Democratic Party of Japan) elected Ichiro Ozawa as its new leader in the election held yesterday. In the party, many members are allergic to Ozawa, but reflecting the missteps taken by former party head Seiji Maehara and other junior members in the leadership, the party charged the veteran lawmakers with the task of reconstructing his party.

Ozawa said in a policy speech before voting: "We must continue to pursue a two-party system and a change of government for the people." He indicated a determination to do his best to take the reins of government. However, it will not be easy for the opposition party to restore public confidence since it suffered a crushing defeat in the House of Representatives election last year and has lost public trust due to a fabricated e-mail scandal.

The Ozawa Minshuto is urged to map out a strategy to play up its presence in the latter half of the current Diet session, which has been conducted under the lead of the ruling parties. A number of key bills are still on the agenda, including administrative reform promotion legislation and medical and healthcare system reform-related bills. It is only natural that the largest opposition grills the government and the ruling parties on these issues in the Diet, but it is undesirable for the new leadership to become a resistant opposition party, like the Japan Socialist Party (JSP) under the so-called 1955 political structure, in which the Liberal Democratic Party assumed political power and the JSP was in the perennial first opposition party. It should take over Maehara's stance of coming up with counterproposals.

Many party members voted for Ozawa because he reportedly is a good election campaigning schemer. Although it is necessary to frequently canvass electoral districts and hold dialogues with voters, but only with such efforts, it will be difficult to win broad support, as Ozawa has said. Now that the LDP is about to broaden its support to attract unaffiliated or young voters, Minshuto needs to work out maneuvers to win back voters in urban areas, where Minshuto suffered crushing defeats in the House of Representatives election last year. The upcoming April 23 by-election in Chiba 7th District for a Lower House seat will be a decisive test to forecast the future of the Ozawa leadership.

Ozawa split up Shinshinto (New Frontier Party) and Jiyuto (Liberal Party), so his image as a "destroyer" is haunting Ozawa. Some members in Minshuto criticize Ozawa's political style as dogmatic. In order also to erase such concerns, Ozawa needs to fulfill his accountability inside and outside the party.

We expect Ozawa to attend party meetings regularly and to express his views before the press. From his remarks in a press conference held after his assumption of the party presidency, however, such enthusiasm was not detected. Ozawa should take the floor in the Diet to interpellate Prime Minister Junichiro

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Koizumi. Dispatching messages is an indispensable qualification required of a political party leader. Ozawa has reiterated: "I also need to change myself." With our trust in his words, we expect him to change himself.

If a political party elects its new leader, it is natural for all party members, whether they like the leader or not, to support that leader. But that is difficult for Minshuto, because the party is a hodge-podge group. Most lawmakers, excluding close aides, were uncooperative toward their leaders. Now Minshuto is at a critical stage, with difficulties lying ahead of the party. All party members must unite to overcome the crisis.

SCHIEFFER